



Ahimsā

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Cosmological Thought in Buddhism

By Francis Story

At the outset, it must be realized that the Buddha did not profess to give any specific instructions regarding the formation of the universe. He laid down, as an essential part of His system of philosophy, only such principles as were general and universal: because it is these alone that have a bearing on man's own nature and must be understood in order to bring the mind out of delusion into the state of enlightenment.

At the time of the Buddha, certain ideas belonging to the schools of Vedic Brahmanism were current regarding the physical world, and, since the Buddha Himself did not categorically deny them, they passed into Buddhist thought with only such modification as was imposed by the central tenets of the philosophy. The view held by the compilers of the Upanishads was that the universe, which is essentially illusory (*māyā*), is a projection of the eternal, self-existing Brahman: that is to say, of the *nirguṇa Brahman*, the neuter, or attributeless Brahman, as distinct from the personalized or *saguṇa Brahmā*. It was supposed to come about by the interpenetration of *prakṛti* (matter) and *puruṣa* (spirit). It was the play (*līlā*) of the divine principle that comprehended all things and penetrated them, in a single unity. It is this view that is held today by the school of Advaita, or absolute monism. There is also a school of qualified monism, but since it shares the central concept of divine creation, or projection, what may be said of it in relation to Buddhism is the same as may be said of Advaita.

It was this theory of a primal moving spirit that Buddhism discarded, substituting for Brahman the universal law of interdependence and causality. If there were a creator, Buddhism argues, he would himself be subject to some law whereby he could perform the act of creation. His being itself requires laws, for to exist is to function, and there must be principles anterior to and above the functioning to make the functioning possible. To put it another way, every action presupposes alternatives, and these alternatives must exist as potentials before the action can be possible. When we say that an action is *possible*, we postulate a law or principle of possibility, and that principle must exist prior to the action. Therefore, there cannot be a First Cause in the absolute sense. There must be a prior condition to the existence of anything, including God. This principle was actually acknowledged in the earliest Upanishadic thought under the name of *ṛta* — the law to which

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Activities

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship:

- Conducts informal seminars on Buddhism.
- Prepares and distributes free educational material.

Programs

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship sponsors the following programs:

- Instructions in meditation.
- Dhamma study groups.
- Retreats (at IMC-USA).

There are no fees for any of the activities or programs offered by the organization. Seminars are designed to present basic information about Buddhism to the general public — anyone may attend. However, study groups and meditation instructions are open to members only.

Retreats last ten days and are coordinated through IMC-USA in Westminster, MD (410-346-7889). Fees are set by IMC-USA. Advance registration is required.

One-on-one discussions about one's individual practice or about Buddhism in general are also available upon request. These discussions are accorded confidential treatment. There is no fee for one-on-one discussions. ■

Dhamma Study Group

An on-going Dhamma study group focusing on the basic teachings of the Buddha meets Sunday mornings at 11:00 o'clock at the home of Allan Bomhard. Call Allan at (843) 720-8531 for directions to his home. There is no fee to participate in this group. ■

Theravādin Buddhism

Theravādin Buddhism is the school that comes closest to the original form of Buddhism. The Theravādin scriptures, composed in the Pali language, come directly from the mouth of the Buddha.

“Theravāda” means “Doctrine of the Elders.” According to tradition, the name is derived from the fact that the doctrine was fixed by 500 Elders of the Holy Order soon after the death of the Buddha.

The Theravādin tradition is the only one of the old schools of Buddhism to have survived among those that are designated “Hīnayāna” by the Mahāyāna. It is sometimes also called “Southern Buddhism” or “Pali Buddhism.”

The teachings of the Theravādin school consist essentially of the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the doctrine of Conditioned Arising, and the doctrine of No Self or No Soul.

The emphasis in the Theravādin tradition is on the liberation of the individual, which takes place through one's own efforts (in meditation) and through observation of the rules of moral discipline.

Theravādin Buddhism is the dominant religion in the countries of Southeast Asia — Śri Lanka (Ceylon), Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), Laos, and Cambodia.

The Buddha's Teachings are the greatest heritage mankind has received from the past. The Buddha's message of nonviolence and peace, of love and compassion, of tolerance and understanding, of truth and wisdom, of respect and regard for all life, of freedom from selfishness, hatred, and violence, delivered over two thousand five hundred years ago, stands good for today and will stand forever as the Truth. It is an eternal message. ■

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even God is subject. But the Upanishadic schools never pursued this concept to its logical conclusion. Buddhism does so, and the result is a rejection of the First Cause entirely. The intermediate agent, God as creator, being found unnecessary, Buddhist thought concerns itself solely with the laws of being, and there is no attempt to present them in anthropomorphic guise.

But Buddhism agrees with Vedantic ideas in accepting the concept of cyclic evolution and dissolution of universes. In Hinduism, a world period represents a day of *Brahmā*; it is a period during which a complete cycle of evolution and decline, leading up to the dissolution of the universe, takes place. This is followed by the period of quiescence, or night of *Brahmā*, between the collapse of one universe and the arising of the next. Leaving out the poetical symbology of the days and nights of *Brahmā*, the Buddhist cyclic system follows the same pattern.

The measurement of cosmic time is called the “Great *Kalpa*” (Pali *kappa*), which may be termed an “aeon.” Its duration is said to be incalculable: “Imagine a mountain consisting of a solid cube of rock, one league in length, in breadth, and in height. If one were to rub it with a piece of cloth once at the end of every hundred years, the time that it would take to wear away such a mountain would not be so long as the duration of a Great *Kalpa*.” The Great *Kalpa*, according to Ledi Sayadaw, is not a period so much as a notion of time itself. It corresponds to the idea of an eternity.

The Great *Kalpa* is itself divided into four subsidiary *kalpas*, each representing a cyclic period of a particular world-system. These periods, which may be denoted as aeons, too, are not calculable, and may vary in length. And while there are four such aeons to an eternity, each of them in turn is subdivided into shorter *kalpas*, or ages, of more or less measurable duration. The third type of *kalpa* is that which corresponds to the life-span of any particular being. The fourth and last *kalpa* is the period that intervenes between the

destruction of one universe and the formation of another. During this vast period of time — or timelessness, for the time exists only in relation to events — the substance of the entire cosmos is reduced to its primal elements and distributed throughout space in an undifferentiated mass. In terms of modern physics, we would say that the subatomic forces are disintegrated and dispersed. This may happen as follows: the universe would expand until it reaches the point at which the force of repulsion overcomes that of attraction, and the particles of matter are scattered widely throughout space. All that would be left of the cosmos would be the released electronic energy, with which the whole of space would be filled.

In this condition, the quiescence would not be altogether complete; so long as a residuum of energy remained, there would be the potentiality of renewed differentiation of matter and a reconstruction of the universe. Like the pendulum that swings to its greatest extremity and, after a moment of equipoise, swings back, or like a vast pulse beating to an unvarying rhythm, the cosmos repeats past history. As before, the process may commence with a tremendous cosmic explosion. Then, over immeasurable ages, the universe begins to take shape. Matter forms itself into stellar clusters and nebulae, and, in the course of time, space again assumes the general aspect with which we are familiar. And life again begins to evolve.

The *Cakkavāla*

The universe is said to comprise a number of *world-systems*, or *cakkavālas*, and the number of these world-systems contained in the whole cosmos is incalculable. The term *galaxy* denotes a particular grouping of world-systems. Each galaxy has its own gravitational field and revolves around a center. Such are the spiral and cloud nebulae galaxies, for example. The *cakkavālas* are local world-systems embedded in these, of which our own solar system is one. Our solar system is situated in one of the arms of a vast galaxy of the flattened disk type, called the Milky Way, which resembles the great spiral nebulae in Andromeda.

The Milky Way is estimated to contain around 150 billion stars, and the distance between them increases the further they are removed from the center of concentration around which they all revolve. Our solar system, which is 30,000 light years away from the galactic center, makes one full revolution around it in approximately 250 million years. To present-day astronomers, this is known as one cosmic year.

A lot of this is scientific conjecture at present, but it is based on reliable data and must be accepted until or unless future discoveries show it to be inaccurate. I mention it here for the bearing it has upon the older cosmological concepts of Buddhism. Agreement between them is found in the hypothesis of a cyclic breaking-up and restoration of the cosmos and in the rejection of a First Cause or creative agency. In both concepts, the act of creation is perpetual and is the outcome of natural processes — it results from the nature of energy and the laws that govern it.

The second important point of contact is the agreement concerning a multiplicity of world-systems, the *cakkavālas* of Buddhism and the solar systems of present-day astronomy. “In our metagalactic system, there are hundreds of millions of galaxies, and each galaxy may be composed of thousands of millions of stars. Even in our galaxy, which numbers approximately 150,000 million stars, there may be hundreds of thousands of planets on which life is likely to originate and develop. Our infinite Universe must also contain an infinite number of inhabited planets.”

In the canonical texts of both Theravādin and Mahāyāna Buddhism, there are numerous references to the multiplicity of worlds that bear sentient life. But it is only in the texts of Mahāyāna Buddhism, not in the words ascribed to the Buddha Himself, that any detailed cosmology is given. And there, as we should expect, the picture presented has some features in common with other ancient cosmologies: the earth is by implication flat, with a great mountain, *Mt. Meru*, at its center. There are seven great oceans encompassed by seven rings of mountains, and

four great continents are situated respectively at the four cardinal points of the compass. The southern continent is *Jambudīpa*, the land of the Rose Apple, or India. Between the four great land masses, there are smaller islands. The sun, moon, and planets are supposed to revolve around *Mt. Meru*, night occurring on *Jambudīpa* when the mountain obscured the sun, and it was day on the Northern continent, *Uttarakuru*.

There are two points to be noticed in connection with this peculiar view of the cosmos. The first is that, if it were indeed the picture currently accepted at the time of the Buddha — and some very ancient texts from the Tipiṭaka tend to show that it was —, it would not have been to the purpose of the Buddha, who was a teacher of spiritual truths, to correct it. Had he attempted to do so, His time and efforts would have been wasted. Few would have understood, and the understanding would not have benefited them spiritually. The majority would have dismissed it as a theory of a lunatic. Furthermore, Pāli is an undeveloped language, in which a vocabulary of relatively few words had to be made to express all ideas. Lacking the necessary terminology, which modern languages have developed and expanded as the growth of knowledge required, the Buddha would have been handicapped by these limitations of language, even had He wished to describe the motions of the planets and the physical construction of the solar system. In Pāli, a word whose principle meaning was originally very simple is made to serve for highly complicated ideas, owing to the absence of any borrowings from other sources or the development of new verbal forms. Thus, the word *khandha*, which philosophically stands for an aggregate of physical and psychological factors, originally meant merely a ‘lump’ of something. It is even used physiologically to denote ‘shoulder.’ With such a restricted vocabulary, ideas tend to remain rudimentary or to be misunderstood. We therefore have no means of knowing whether the terms employed to describe a world-system are to be taken literally or as makeshift approximations,

analogies or poetic fictions.

However that may be, it is a striking fact that the true picture of the solar system as we now have it, is actually in closer conformity with the Buddha's teaching of universal principles than is the traditional one held by the Buddhist commentators or developed in Mahāyāna writings. It carries out the principle of uninterrupted revolution denoted by the wheel (*cakka*) and that of having no beginning point, of which the physical symbol is the sphere. If, in fact, we would seek for a material illustration of the law of recurrence, of cyclic progression under the domination of incessant change, we should find its perfect expression in the revolving galaxies, the solar systems, and the structure of the atom.

In the Saṃyutta Nikāya (II, 178), the Buddha speaks of the succession of kalpas in the following words:

Undetermined, Bhikkhus, is the beginning of this world. The absolute beginning point of beings running on in birth after birth bound by ignorance and the bonds of craving is not discernible.

The Pāli word translated here as 'undetermined' is *anamata*, meaning that which is unknown and unascertained. The sense, therefore, is that the absolute beginning point of the cycles is not to be known by calculation. There is no limit by which it can be defined. "The absolute beginning point ... is not discernible" is equivalent to saying that it does not exist. The proposition contained in the words "The absolute beginning point ... is not discernible" can therefore only mean that, although each individual kalpa has its beginning, middle, and end, there is no beginning to the succession of Great Kalpas in general. The cyclic successions have existed always, the reason being that they do not exist *in time*, but time, as a progression of events, exists in them. The time of Bergson, which is absolute duration, is not susceptible of measurement other than that which is brought about by cutting into the flow of specific events. It is these more or less

arbitrary divisions that we commonly mean when we speak of time. A beginning of time in the state of timelessness is clearly an impossibility; it is only *periods* of time that can have a beginning and an end. We shall have occasion to deal further with the philosophical difference between time as a symbol of space and time that is absolute duration when we discuss the nature of the flux of becoming, later on.

Stages of Great Cycles

There are four incalculable epochs, Bhikkhus. The four are: the Enveloping Epoch; the Enveloped Epoch; the Developing Epoch; and the Developed Epoch. The epoch, Bhikkhus, during which there is cosmic envelopment is not easy to reckon as so many years, or centuries, or tens or hundreds of centuries.

The Enveloping Epoch is the period during which the world-system is in decline; the Enveloped Epoch is that in which it is in the state of dissolution. The Developing Epoch is the period of growth, when life evolves from lower to higher stages; the Developed Epoch is that in which evolution has reached its highest peak. "Having once been reinstated, while the world-system continues to be in that state, it is said to be Developed." Each of these periods is a fourth part of a Great Kalpa, so it will be seen that every Great Kalpa involves the full development of sentient life followed by its total disappearance from a world-system.

Now, there is a clear connection in Buddhist thought between the total *kamma* of beings taking birth in a given world-system and the fate of that system considered as a physical entity. While universes, like all other phenomena, are subject to dissolution and must, after the lapse of aeons, pass away, the manner of their dissolution is in a certain sense determined by the accumulated *kamma* of the beings inhabiting them. On the other hand, the re-formation of the universe after a period of quiescence is brought about by unexpended residual *kamma* of the sentient beings

who formerly lived in it. Thus, we find it stated in the Dīgha Nikāya:

Now there comes a time, Bhikkhus, when, sooner or later, after the lapse of a long, long period of time, this world-system passes away. And when this happens, beings have mostly been reborn in the Realm of Radiance, and there they will dwell made of mind, feeding on joy, radiating light from themselves, traversing the heavens, continuing in glory; and thus they remain for a long, long period of time.

Now, there comes also a time, Bhikkhus, when, sooner or later, the world-system begins to re-evolve. When this happens, the abode of Brahmā appears, but it is empty. And some being or other, either because his span of years has passed or his merit is exhausted, falls from that Realm of Radiance and comes to life in the abode of Brahmā. And there also he lives made of mind, feeding on joy, radiating light from himself, traversing the heavens, continuing in glory; and thus does he remain for a long, long period of time.

Every world-system in its complete state comprises thirty planes of existence in addition to that occupied by human life. These planes are spoken of in the popular cosmology of Buddhism as being ranged one above the other, but, as we have seen, they have no definite spatial location in reality but interpenetrate one another on different vibrational frequencies. Nonetheless, it is necessary to map them in ascending order, to make their relationship to one another explicit, just as they are found in the Buddhist treatises on the subject. When this is done, the result is a chart of *saṃsāra*, showing all the states comprised in what is known as the Three Worlds (*ti-loka*), namely, the Realm of Sense-Desire (*kāma-loka*), the Fine-Material Realm (*rūpa-loka*), and the Non-Material Realm (or the Realm of Formlessness; *arūpa-loka*) (see the chart on the next page).

Of these thirty-one abodes, those that

constitute the sphere of sense-desire (*kāma-loka*) are numbers 1—11 in the chart, including the inferior states, the human world, and the lower heavenly planes. Above these, numbers 12—27 are the fine-material worlds, but still having form (*rūpa*) and differentiation. In all of these realms, the beings are equipped with both mind and body, with the sole exception of number 22, where the Brahmās have form only. The reason for this peculiar sphere will be given later. Numbers 28—31 constitute the non-material, or formless, realms inhabited by a highly-developed class of beings that exist solely on the psychological level as zones of mental energy.

The Fine-Material Realm includes a group of five worlds (the Pure Abodes, or *Suddhāvāsa*, numbers 23—27) that are accessible after death only to those who, before their death, have attained the third of the four stages of Sainthood, that is, that of an *Anāgāmi*, or Non-returner. On the expiration of the life-span in that sphere, the *Anāgāmi* passes straight into Parinibbāna, having attained to the state of Arahantship in the Pure Abodes, which belong to the Brahmā-worlds. They are worlds of form because it is not possible to attain enlightenment without the realization of Impermanence (*anicca*), Suffering (*dukkha*), and Non-self (*anattā*) in the physical as well as the mental constituents of personality.

The spheres above them (numbers 28 to 31) are the four Non-Material, or Formless, worlds, which correspond to the four formless *jhānas*. They are the planes in which are reborn those who have obtained the mental absorptions of the Infinity of Space, Infinity of Consciousness, of Nothingness, and of Neither-Perception-nor-Non-Perception, but who have not transcended them by ultimate realization and the complete destruction of the elements of attachment. These Brahmās are reborn in one of the lower planes at the end of their life-span.

It is these states that were conceived as being the ultimate goal by the Vedic teachers prior to the Buddha and are still so in modern Hinduism. They represent the “Union with Brahmā” that was attained by Siddhattha Gotama’s first teachers,

Alāra Kālāma and Uddaka Ramaputta.

The sphere of the sensationless beings (*asañña-satta Brahmāloka*), whose nature consists only of material form without any accompanying mental Aggregates (*nāma-kkhandha*), is where ascetics are reborn who on earth have attained in their meditation the temporary subsidence of mental activity, under the mistaken belief that suffering is solely a characteristic of the mental life. After exhaustion of the kamma causing that

form of existence, they are reborn again in a lower sphere where both material form and mind exist.

Between some of these worlds of being and others, there is no great physical separation, and, in some instances, they occupy the same dimensional space, as in the case of the human and animal worlds. Others interpenetrate one another so closely, although their vibrational frequencies are different, that, by an adjustment of their mental frequencies, beings belonging to one plane are able to manifest on others. It is for this reason that the

The Thirty-one Abodes

31	Neva-sañña-nāsaññāyatanūpaga Devā	Sphere of Neither Perception-nor-Non-Perception
30	Ākiñcaññāyatanūpaga Devā	Sphere of the Knowledge of Nothingness
29	Viññāṇañcāyatanūpaga Devā	Sphere of the Infinity of Consciousness
28	Ākāsañcāyatanūpaga Devā	Sphere of the Infinity of Space
27	Akaniṭṭhā Brahmā	Realm of Supreme Brahmās
26	Sudassī Brahmā	Realm of Clear-Sighted Brahmās
25	Sudassa Brahmā	Realm of Beautiful Brahmās
24	Atappa Brahmā	Realm of Serene Brahmās
23	Avihā Brahmā	Realm of Immobile Brahmās
22	Asañña-satta Brahmā	Realm of Sensationless Brahmās
21	Vehaphala Brahmā	Realm of Greatly-Rewarded Brahmās
20	Subha Kiṇha Brahmā	Realm of Brahmās of Steady Aura
19	Appamāṇa Subha Brahmā	Realm of Brahmās of Infinite Aura
18	Paritta Subha Brahmā	Realm of Brahmās of Minor Aura
17	Ābhassara Brahmā	Realm of Radiant Brahmās
16	Appamānābha Brahmā	Realm of Brahmās of Infinite Luster
15	Parittābha Brahmā	Realm of Brahmās of Minor Luster
14	Mahā Brahmā	Realm of Great Brahmās
13	Brahma-Purohita Brahmā	Ministers of Brahmā
12	Brahma-Parisajja Brahmā	Retinue of Brahmā
11	Paranimmita-vasavatti Brahmā	Devas enjoying (or utilizing) the creation of others
10	Nimmāna-rati Devā	Devas enjoying their own creations
9	Tusita Devā	Devas enjoying pleasure
8	Yāma Devā	Yāma Devas
7	Tāvātimsa Devā	Realm of the Thirty-three Devas
6	Catumahārājika Devā	Realm of the Four Great Kings (of the Four Quarters)
5	Manussa Loka	The Human Realm
4	Tiracchāna Yoni	The Animal Realm
3	Peta Loka	Realm of Unhappy Spirits (Petas)
2	Asura Loka	Realm of Demons
1	Niraya	Realm of Inferno (Hells)

phenomena of spiritualism are so often confusing and baffling. The entities that are contacted during spiritualist séances often belong to worlds lower than the human, more particularly the world of *petas*, or unhappy spirits, who, by excessive attachment, are “earthbound” until such time as their unwholesome kamma is expended.

When it happens that psychic manifestations from the higher planes appear, it can only be from those worlds that are but very slightly above the human, that is to say, the lower planes of the Deva-loka. It is from these comparatively happy realms of existence that spiritualists derive the comfort that the psychic evidence for survival affords them; but the entities reborn on this level have no greater knowledge concerning the ultimate truths of existence than we have ourselves. Often, indeed, their knowledge is less. The only fact of which they are certain is that they are living in pleasant surroundings and that their happiness is increased by their ability to communicate with the human world. For the most part, they seem to be unaware that they must eventually pass away from their present condition to be reborn elsewhere. In psychic communications, there is, however, the recurring theme of transitoriness: the entities are said to pass on to higher realms after a period of supposed preparation. In reality, they are frequently reborn as human beings or in some still lower world. From other communications received by psychic mediums, it is evident that the state between one human birth and another is not always the “Summerland” that spiritualism, for the consolation of the bereaved, emphasizes so strongly.

Communication with the higher realms of being in the fine-material plane is possible only to those who have strenuously cultivated the requisite meditation practices. In the case of the formless worlds, an especially high attainment is necessary. Only those who have cultivated the four *jhānas* associated with the spheres of infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, and neither-perception-nor-non-perception (an indescribably subtle and refined state of

consciousness) can make contact with beings of those realms. In Hinduism, this is known as “Union with Brahmā” and is believed to be the ultimate attainment. The Buddha, who was a “Knower of Brahmā” in the sense that He had Himself made contact with the Brahma-world, attributes the belief in a Creator God on the part of other sages, who had not gone beyond the realm of form, to this faculty. The reference to this is to be found in the Brahmajāla and Aggañña Suttas of the Dīgha Nikāya.

It is written that, at the destruction of a world-system, either by fire, water, or wind, the realms of existence are demolished from the lowest plane up to the highest Brahma-world.

At the end of the cycle, the beings from the lower worlds, by attaining the *jhānic* states, become reborn in the Realm of Radiance. From here, after the lapse of the Enveloped Period, they again descend to be reborn in the human world, which has by then been reconstructed by natural processes and has become sufficiently evolved to manifest the higher forms of life once more.

Summary

The universe has no beginning. It is the product of *kamma*, the law of the cause and effect of actions, according to which virtuous actions bring pleasure in the future and nonvirtuous actions bring pain. It is a natural law, accounting for all the happiness and suffering in the world. The beings of the universe have been reborn without beginning in various realms as deities, demigods, humans, animals, spirits (*petas*), and hell beings. Their actions create not only their individual experiences of pleasure and pain but also the domains in which they dwell. The physical universe is thus the product of the individual and collective actions of the inhabitants of the universe. Much of Buddhist practice is directed at performing deeds that will bring happiness in the future, avoiding deeds that will bring pain, and counteracting the future effects of unwholesome deeds done in the past. And there are some who seek the ultimate goal of liberation

from the bonds of *kamma* and the universe it has forged.

The workings of *kamma* are understood over the course of lifetimes without beginning, and, thus, Buddhists speak not only of days and months and years, but also of aeons (*kalpas*). The cosmological systems of Indian Buddhism describe a universe that passes through four periods: the Developing Epoch (creation and growth); the Developed Epoch (abiding); the Enveloping Epoch (decline); and the Enveloped

Epoch (dissolution / nothingness). The physical universe is created during the first period. Beings come to inhabit the universe during the period of abiding. During the period of decline, the physical universe starts to decay. This is followed by a period of dissolution into nothingness, after which the fourfold cycle begins again. ■

Condensed from “Cosmological Thought in Buddhism and Modern Science,” included in *Dimensions of Buddhist Thought: Collected Essays* by Francis Story — Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society (1985), pp. 285—302.

Buddhism & Harmlessness

The boundless kindness of the Buddha was directed not only to human beings but to animals as well. It was the Buddha who banned the sacrifice of animals and admonished His followers to extend unlimited, universal love and goodwill (*mettā*) to all living beings, even the tiniest creature that crawls at one’s feet. No one, He taught, has the right to destroy the life of another inasmuch as life is precious to all.

A Bhikkhu is expected to exercise this loving-kindness to such an extent that he is forbidden by the Vinaya rules even to dig or cause to dig the ground. He cannot even drink water without filtering it.

Asoka, the great Buddhist King, wrote on rock and monolith, saying: “The living must not be nourished with the living. Even chaff with insects must not be burnt.”

A genuine follower of the Buddha must practice this loving-kindness (*mettā*) towards every living being and must identify himself with all, making no distinctions whatever. It is this loving-kindness, one of the most salient characteristics of Buddhism, that attempts to break down all barriers of caste, color, race, sex, religion, ethnic origin, etc. that separate one person from another.

In its teaching, Buddhism has no features that confine it to a particular nation, particular time, or particular group of people. It is universal in its applicability and its appeal. ■

Liberating the Mind

Mind is nothing beyond its cognizing function. Nowhere, behind or within that function, can an individual agent or permanent entity be detected. By one’s own direct experience, one will thus arrive at the great truth of No-soul, or Impersonality (*anattā*). The Buddha’s mind-doctrine is not restricted to a theoretical knowledge of the mind, but it aims at the shaping of the mind and, through it, of life.

States of consciousness are determined by the dynamic interplay between the primary influences of habituating and dehabituating forces. The former are accounted for by action (*kamma*) and its residues (*samkhāra*), while the latter are specified within Buddhist principles of meditative practice, and most directly in the techniques of analytical insight (*vipassanā*). These influences function in opposition to each other insofar as action and its residues tend to bind movement within the stream of consciousness, while insight, by penetrating and breaking down reifying structures, is seen as unbinding streams of consciousness; in other words, as liberating them. This dehabituating and hence freeing of consciousness from its cognitive, perceptual, and emotional limitations is viewed as a process of consciousness purification — a process which is facilitated by and in fact dependent upon the initiation and employment of contemplative exercises that consist largely in the structural manipulation of thought-forms. ■

The Essentials of Buddha-Dhamma In Practice

By Sayagyi U Ba Khin

Anicca, *Dukkha*, and *Anattā* are the three essential elements in the Buddha's teachings.

If you know *Anicca* (Impermanence) truly, you know *Dukkha* (Unsatisfactoriness) also as a sequel and *Anattā* (No-self) as the ultimate truth. It takes time to understand the three together. *Anicca* is, of course, the essential factor that must first be experienced and understood by practice. A mere reading of the books on Buddhism or book-knowledge of the *Buddha-Dhamma* will not be enough for the understanding of true *Anicca* because the experiential aspect will be missing. It is only through experience and understanding of the nature of *Anicca* as an ever-changing process within your very self that you can understand *Anicca* in the way the Buddha would like you to understand it. This understanding of *Anicca* can be developed, as in the days of the Buddha, by persons who have no book-knowledge whatsoever of Buddhism.

To understand *Anicca*, one must follow strictly and diligently the Noble Eightfold Path, which is divided into the three steps of *Sīla*, *Samādhi*, and *Paññā*.

Sīla, or virtuous living, is the base for *Samādhi*, that is, control of the mind to one-pointedness. It is only when *Samādhi* is good that one can develop *Paññā* (Wisdom). So *Sīla* and *Samādhi* are the prerequisites for *Paññā*. By *Paññā* is meant the understanding of *Anicca*, *Dukkha*, and *Anattā* through the practice of *Vipassanā*.

Whether a Buddha has arisen or not, the practice of *Sīla* and *Samādhi* is present in the world of mankind. In fact, they are the common denominators of all religious faith. They are, however, not the means to the end — the end of

suffering.

In his search for this end of suffering, Prince *Siddhattha* found this out, and he worked his way through to find the Path that leads to the end of suffering. After solid work for six years, he found the way out, became completely enlightened, and then taught men and gods to follow the Path that leads them to the end of suffering.

In this connection, I should like to explain that each action, either by deed, word, or thought, leaves behind a force of action, *Samkhāra* (or *Kamma*), for everyone, which becomes the source of supply of energy to sustain life, which is inevitably followed by suffering and death. It is by development of the power inherent in the understanding of *Anicca*, *Dukkha*, and *Anattā* that one is able to rid oneself of the *Samkhāra*, which becomes accumulated in one's own personal account. This process begins with the true understanding of *Anicca*, while further accumulations of fresh actions and the reduction of the supply of energy to sustain life are taking place simultaneously from time to time and from day to day. It is, therefore, a matter of a lifetime or more to get rid of all one's own *Samkhāra* (or *Kamma*). He who has gotten himself rid of all *Samkhāra* (or *Kamma*) comes to the end of suffering, because by then, there is no remainder of his *Samkhāra* to give the necessary life energy to sustain him in any form of life. This end of suffering is reached by the Buddha and the *Arahats* on the termination of their lives, when they pass into *Parinibbāna*. For us of today, who take to *Vipassanā* meditation, it should suffice if we can understand *Anicca* very well and reach the stage of an *Ariya* (Noble One): a *Sotāpatti-puggala* (the first stage of Enlightenment), one who will not live more than seven lives to come to the end of suffering.

This *Anicca*, which opens the door to the understanding of *Dukkha* and *Anattā*, and then leads to the end of suffering eventually, can be encountered only through a Buddha or, after he passes away, through his teachings for as long as

those aspects relating to the Eightfold Noble Path and the thirty-seven Factors of Enlightenment (*Bodhi-Pakkhiya*) remain intact and are available to the aspirant.

For progress in *Vipassanā* meditation, a student must keep knowing *Anicca* as continuously as possible. The Buddha's advice to monks is that they shall try to maintain the awareness of *Anicca* or *Dukkha* or *Anattā* in all postures, whether sitting or standing or walking or lying down. The continuity of awareness of *Anicca* and so of *Dukkha* and *Anattā* is the secret of success. The last words of the Buddha, just before he breathed his last and passed away into *Mahāparinibbāna* were:

*Vayadhammā saṁkhārā;
Appamādena sampādetha.*

*Decay is inherent in all compounded things.
Work out your own salvation with diligence.*

Dīgha Nikāya, Sutta 16:1

This is in fact the essence of all his teachings during the forty-five years he taught. If you will keep up the awareness of *Anicca* that is inherent in all compounded things, you are sure to reach the goal in the course of time.

In the meantime, as you develop in the understanding of *Anicca*, your insight into “what is true of nature” will become greater and greater. So much so that eventually you will have no doubt whatsoever of the three characteristics of *Anicca*, *Dukkha*, and *Anattā*. It is only then that you are in a position to go ahead for the goal in view.

Now that you know *Anicca* as the first essential factor, you should try to understand what *Anicca* is with clarity and as extensively as possible — so as not to get confused in the course of practice or discussion.

The real meaning of *Anicca* is Impermanence or Decay — that is, the inherent nature of impermanence or decay in everything

that exists in the universe, whether animate or inanimate.

To make my work of explanation easy for the present-day generation, I might draw attention to the opening sentences of the chapter “Atomic Contents” in the book *Inside the Atom* by Isaac Asimov and also to a portion of the contents on page 159 of the book about chemical reactions going on at the same time in all parts of the body of a living creature such as a human being.

This should be sufficient to bring home the point of view that all things, different as they are, are made of tiny particles called “atoms.” These atoms have been proved by science to be in a state of arising and dissolution, or change. We should accordingly accept the concept of the Buddha that all compounded things are subject to change, decay, or *Anicca*.

But in expounding the theory of *Anicca*, the Buddha started with the behavior that makes matter, and matter as known to the Buddha is very much smaller than the atom that the science of today has discovered. The Buddha made it known to his disciples that everything that exists in the universe, whether animate or inanimate, is composed of *Kalāpas* (very much smaller than atoms), each dying out simultaneously as it comes into being. Each *Kalāpa* is a mass formed of the eight nature elements, namely, *Paṭhavī*, *Āpo*, *Tejo*, *Vāyo*, *Vañña*, *Gandha*, *Rasa*, *Ojā* (solid, liquid, heat, motion, color, odor, taste, and nutriment). The first four are called material qualities that are predominant in a *Kalāpa*. The other four are merely subsidiaries that are dependent upon and born out of the former. A *Kalāpa* is the minutest particle in the physical plane — still beyond the range of science of today.

It is only when the eight nature elements (which have merely the characteristics of behavior) are together that the entity of a *Kalāpa* (the tiniest particle of matter in the physical plane) is formed. In other words, the co-existence for a moment of these eight nature elements of behavior makes a mass, just for that moment, which in Buddhism is known as a *Kalāpa*. The size of a

Kalāpa is about 1/46,656th part of a particle of dust from the wheel of a chariot in summer in India. The life span of a *Kalāpa* is a moment, there being a trillion such moments in the wink of an eye of a human being. These *Kalāpas* are all in a state of perpetual change or flux. To a developed student in *Vipassanā* meditation, they can be felt as a stream of energy. The human body is not an entity as it seems to be, but a continuum of an aggregate of matter (*Rūpa*) with the life force (*Nāma*) co-existing.

To know that our very body is composed of tiny *Kalāpas*, all in a state of change, is to know what is true of the nature of change or decay. This nature of change or decay (*Anicca*), occasioned by the continual breakdown and replacement of *Kalāpas*, all in a state of combustion, must necessarily be identified with *Dukkha*, the truth of suffering. It is only when you experience impermanence (*Anicca*) as *Dukkha* (suffering or ill) that you come to the realization of the Truth of Suffering of the Four Noble Truths, on which so much emphasis has been laid in the teachings of the Buddha. Why? Because when you realize the subtle nature of *Dukkha*, from which you cannot escape for a moment, you will become truly afraid of, disgusted with, and disinclined to continue your very existence of *Rūpa* and *Nāma* and look out for a way of escape to a state beyond — that is, beyond *Dukkha*, and so to the end of suffering. What that end of suffering would be like, you will be able to have a taste of, even as a human being, when you reach the level of *Sotāpatti* and are developed well enough by practice to go into the unconditioned state of the Peace of *Nibbāna* within.

Be that as it may, for everyday life, no sooner are you able to keep up the awareness of *Anicca* in practice, then you will know for yourself that a change is taking place in you, both physically and mentally, for the better.

Before entering into the practice of *Vipassanā* meditation, that is, after *Samādhi* has been developed to a proper level, a student should first be acquainted with the theoretical knowledge

of *Rūpa* (matter) and *Nāma* (mind and mental properties). If he has understood these well in theory and has come to the proper level of *Samādhi*, there is every likelihood of his understanding *Anicca*, *Dukkha*, and *Anattā* in the true sense of the words of the Buddha.

In *Vipassanā* meditation, one contemplates not only the changing nature (*Anicca*) of *Rūpa* or matter, but also the changing nature (*Anicca*) of *Nāma*, thought-elements of attention projected towards the process of change of *Rūpa* or matter. At times, the attention may be on the *Anicca* of *Rūpa* or matter only. At times, the attention may be on the *Anicca* of thought-elements (*Nāma*). When one is contemplating the *Anicca* of *Rūpa* or matter, one realizes also that the thought-elements arising simultaneously with the awareness of the *Anicca* of *Rūpa* or matter are also in a state of transition or change. In that case, you are knowing the *Anicca* of both *Rūpa* and *Nāma* together.

All I have said so far relates to the understanding of *Anicca* through the body-feelings, to the understanding of the process of change of *Rūpa* or matter, and also of the thought-elements depending upon such changing processes. You should know also that *Anicca* can be understood through other types of feeling as well.

Anicca can be developed through feeling:

1. By contact of visible form with the sense organ of the eye;
2. By contact of sound with the sense organ of the ear;
3. By contact of smell with the sense organ of the nose;
4. By contact of taste with the sense organ of the tongue;
5. By contact of touch with the sense organ of the body;

6. By contact of thought with the sense organ of the mind.

In fact, one can develop the understanding of *Anicca* through any of the six organs of sense. In practice, however, we have found that, of all types of feelings, the feelings of the contact of touch with the component parts of the body in a process of change covers a wide area for introspective meditation. Not only that, but the feeling by contact of touch (by way of the friction, radiation, and vibrations of the *Kalāpas* within) with the component parts of the body is more tangible than other types of feeling, and, therefore, a beginner in *Vipassanā* meditation can come to the understanding of *Anicca* more easily through body feelings of the nature of change of *Rūpa* or matter. This is the main reason why we have chosen the body feeling as a medium for the quick understanding of *Anicca*. It is open to anyone to try other means, but my suggestion is that one should have oneself well established in the understanding of *Anicca* through body feelings before an attempt is made through other types of feeling.

There are ten levels of knowledge of *Vipassanā*, namely:

1. *Sammasana*: the appreciation of *Anicca*, *Dukkha*, and *Anattā* by close observation and analysis, of course, theoretically.
2. *Udayabbaya*: knowledge of the arising and dissolution of *Rūpa* and *Nāma*.
3. *Bhaṅga*: knowledge of the fast-changing nature of *Rūpa* and *Nāma* — as a swift flow of current or a stream of energy.
4. *Bhaya*: knowledge of the fact that this very existence is dreadful.
5. *Ādīnava*: knowledge of the fact that this very existence is full of evils.
6. *Nibbidā*: knowledge of the fact that this very

existence is disgusting.

7. *Muccitu-kamyatā*: knowledge of the urgent need to escape from this very existence.
8. *Paṭisaṃkha*: knowledge of the fact that the time has come to work with full realization for salvation with *Anicca* as the base.
9. *Samkhārupekkhā*: knowledge of the fact that the stage is now set to get detached from *Samkhāra* and to break away from ego-centrism.
10. *Anuloma*: knowledge that would accelerate that attempt to reach the goal.

These are the levels of attainment that one gets through during the course of *Vipassanā* meditation, which, in the case of those who reach the goal in a short time, can be known only in retrospect. With progress in the understanding of *Anicca*, one gets through these levels of attainment; subject, however, to adjustments or help at certain levels by a competent teacher. One should avoid looking forward to such attainments in anticipation, as this will distract one from the continuity of awareness of *Anicca*, which alone can and will give one the desired reward.

Now let me deal with *Vipassanā* meditation from the point of view of a householder in everyday life and explain the benefit one can derive from it, here and now, in this very lifetime.

The initial object of *Vipassanā* Meditation is to activate *Anicca* in one's own self or to experience one's own inner self in *Anicca* and to get eventually to a state of inner and outer calmness and balance. This is achieved when one becomes engrossed in the feeling of *Anicca* within. The world is now facing serious problems threatening mankind. It is just the right time for everyone to take to *Vipassanā* meditation and learn how to find a deep pool of quiet in the midst of all that is happening today. *Anicca* is inside everybody. Just a look into one's own self and

there it is — *Anicca* to be experienced. When one can feel *Anicca*, when one can experience *Anicca*, and when one can become engrossed in *Anicca*, one can at will cut away from the world of ideation outside. *Anicca* is, for the householder, the gem of life that he will treasure to create a reservoir of calm and balanced energy for his own well-being and for the welfare of society. *Anicca*, when properly developed, strikes at the root of one's physical and mental ills and removes gradually whatever is bad in one, that is, the sources of such physical and mental ills. In the lifetime of the Buddha, there were some 70 million people in *Sāvattthī* and places around, in the kingdom of *Pasenadi Kosala*. Of them, about 50 million were *Ariyas* who had passed into the Stream of *Sotāpatti*. The number of householders who took to *Vipassanā* meditation must therefore have been more.

Anicca is not reserved for men who have renounced the world for the homeless life. It is for the householder as well. In spite of drawbacks that make a householder restless in these days, a competent teacher or guide can help a student to get *Anicca* activated in a comparatively short time. Once he has got it activated, all that is necessary would be for him to try and preserve it, but he must make it a point, as soon as time or opportunity presents itself for further progress, to work for the stage of *Bhaṅga* — the third level of knowledge in *Vipassanā*. If he reaches this level, there will be little or no problem, because he should then be able to experience *Anicca* without much ado and almost automatically. In this case, *Anicca* shall become his base, for return thereto as soon as the domestic needs of daily life, all physical and mental activities, are over. There is likely, however, to be some difficulty with one who has not as yet reached the stage of *Bhaṅga*. It will be just like a tug-of-war for him between *Anicca* within and physical and mental activities outside the body. So, it would be wise for him to follow the motto of “Work while you work; play while you play.” There is no need for him to be

activating *Anicca* all the time. It should suffice if this could be confined to the regular period or periods set apart in the day or night for the purpose. During this time at least, an attempt must be made to keep the mind/attention inside the body with the awareness exclusively of *Anicca*, that is to say, his awareness of *Anicca* should be from moment to moment, or so continuous it does not allow for the interpolation of any discursive or distracting thoughts, which are definitely detrimental to progress. In case this is not possible, he would have to go back to respiration mindfulness, because *Samādhi* is the key to *Anicca*. To get good *Samādhi*, *Sīla* has to be perfect, since *Samādhi* is built upon *Sīla*. For good *Anicca*, *Samādhi* must be good. If *Samādhi* is excellent, awareness of *Anicca* will also become excellent.

There is no special technique for activating *Anicca* other than the use of the mind set to a perfect state of balance and attention projected to the object of meditation. In *Vipassanā*, the object of meditation is *Anicca* and therefore, in the case of those used to drawing back their attention to body feeling, they can feel *Anicca* directly. In experiencing *Anicca* on or in the body, it should first be in the area where one can easily get his attention engrossed, changing the areas of attention from place to place, from head to feet and from feet to head, at times probing into the interior. At this stage, it must be clearly understood that no attention is to be paid to the anatomy of the body but right to the formation of matter (*Kalāpas*) and the nature of their constant change. If these instructions are observed, there will surely be progress, but the progress depends also on one's *Parāmis* (Perfections) and the devotion of the individual to the work of meditation. If he attains high levels of knowledge, his power to understand the three characteristics of *Anicca*, *Dukkha*, and *Anattā* will increase, and he will accordingly come nearer and nearer to the goal of *Ariya* — which every householder should keep in view.

This is the age of science. Men today have no utopia. They will not accept anything unless the results are good, concrete, vivid, personal, and

here-and-now.

When the Buddha was alive, he said to the Kālāmas:

Now look, Kālāmas: In cases where occasion for doubts exists, it is right and proper to doubt. Do not go by mere report or tradition or hearsay; nor should you accept something merely because it is written in the scriptures or because it agrees with (unsupported) thinking or specious reasoning; nor should you accept something because it agrees with accepted conventions or upon the authority of one who may appear competent; nor should you be guided by the feeling of reverence, thinking, "This is our teacher". But, Kālāmas, when you yourselves know (by observation, experience, and right judgment): "Such things are wrong, such things are blameworthy; such things are censured by the wise; such things when undertaken and followed lead to harm and ill" — then you should abandon such things. But when you yourselves know: "Such things are good, such things are praiseworthy; such things are commended by the wise; such things when undertaken and followed lead to the good and welfare of all beings" — then you should accept, hold to, and follow such things.

Anguttara Nikāya, Sutta 3:65

The time clock of *Vipassanā* is now struck — that is, for the revival of the *Buddha-Dhamma*, *Vipassanā* in practice. We have no doubt whatsoever about definite results accruing to those who would with open mind sincerely undergo a course of training under a competent teacher. I mean results that will be accepted as good, concrete, vivid, personal, here-and-now, results that will keep them in good stead and in a state of well-being and happiness for the rest of their lives. ■

**MAY ALL BEINGS BE HAPPY
MAY PEACE PREVAIL IN THIS WORLD**

Sayagyi U Ba Khin (1899—1971), Rangoon, 1968

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